

Muslim inmates charge Arkansas with violating their religious liberty

One Muslim prisoner had his religious accommodations taken away when he protested the combined services with the Nation of Islam and Nation of Gods and Earths, groups that follow distinct religious teachings.

by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue

Muslim prisoners in Arkansas have sued the state's prison system for requiring them to attend a combined Friday prayer service with members of the Nation of Islam and Nation of Gods and Earths, groups that follow distinct religious teachings.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim civil rights advocacy group, [filed the lawsuit in March against the Arkansas Department of Correction](#) on behalf of maximum-security inmates Gregory Houston Holt, Rodney Martin, and Wayde Stewart. The suit argues that Arkansas has violated the First Amendment and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act.

In 2015 Holt, known as Abdul Maalik Muhammad after his conversion, successfully challenged the Arkansas prison system's no-beard policy, which the US Supreme Court unanimously ruled was unconstitutional. In the current case, CAIR told the federal court that when Muhammad stopped going to the prison's combined Friday services in protest, his other Muslim faith accommodations were taken away.

"Religious freedom protects everyone's ability to worship with those who share their faith," said Lena Masri, CAIR national litigation director, in a statement. "Followers of Islam, Nation of Islam, and the Nation of Gods and Earths should be permitted to worship separately in a manner of their choice."

The Nation of Islam, founded in 1930, combines Muslim teachings with black nationalist ideas. It's estimated to have about 100,000 US adherents. The Nation of Gods and Earths, also known as the Five-Percent Nation or the Five Percenters, split

from the Nation of Islam in 1963 and has fewer than 50,000 followers.

The Arkansas prison system policy requires Muslims to attend the combined Friday prayer services or risk losing their designation as Muslims, which could cause them to lose religious accommodations such as a specialized Ramadan meal program.

“It is unacceptable that Arkansas thinks it may define who is a Muslim based on whether or not they attend Friday services, all while refusing to provide spiritually valid Friday services,” said Carolyn Homer, CAIR’s national trial attorney. “No one checks how often Christians in the facilities attend Sunday services before letting them celebrate Christmas.”

She noted that Arkansas’s prisons recognize seven different Christian denominations and offer separate prayer services identified as Baptist, Catholic, Jehovah’s Witness, Pentecostal, Protestant, and Seventh-day Adventist, as well as nondenominational services.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons lists Islam and the Nation of Islam as separate faith groups. CAIR’s lawsuit asks for Arkansas to do the same and to recognize the Nation of Gods and Earths as a separate faith group.

The lawsuit follows other recent high-profile cases of Muslim inmates being denied religious accommodations, including a Supreme Court decision to permit the execution of an Alabama man without allowing his imam to be present in the death chamber with him. The group Muslim Advocates filed a suit alleging that Immigration and Customs Enforcement denied accommodations to five detained Somali refugees, including halal meals, ability to perform daily prayers, and access to prayer rugs. A Muslim man detained by Customs and Border Protection said that the only food offered to him was a pork sandwich. —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Muslim inmates charge Arkansas with violating their religious liberty.”